

Testimony of Bruce Felknor

I thank Chairman Filner and this committee for the opportunity to speak for the surviving remnant of merchant mariners of World War II. And I am profoundly grateful to my Representative Jan Schakowsky, the majority's Chief Deputy Whip, for consenting to present my testimony. (Surgery has left me presently voiceless.)

I am proud to be a merchant marine veteran of World War II. Perhaps 10,000 of us remain from the quarter-million men and boys, then aged 16 to the 80s and beyond. Roosevelt and Churchill and their generals and admirals knew how vital was our task and how gallantly and effectively we served and how we delivered. And our lives were on the line every time we left port.

So when the war was won, with our essential help, why were we selected out when Congress created the GI Bill of Rights? A major reason was the myth of merchant marine pay, based on comparisons that ignored navy dependent allowances, freedom from income tax, paid vacation and time between voyages.

Second, because we were so few. The GIs had 13 million sets of parents; we had one-quarter of 1 million. In the folks-at-home department [read "votes"] we were outnumbered 52 to 1.

A third major reason was lack of public knowledge and awareness of what a merchant marine was and what it did. No war correspondents were stationed on freighters or tankers. Outside port cities the news media were generally oblivious to the merchant shipping that carried every engine of war to the front. Only occasionally did a dramatic story about a freighter or tanker or lifeboat trip from a paper in some seaport find its way into the national news wire services.

Wartime motion pictures were a staple of hometown movie theaters--but I know of only one feature film about the merchant marine: 1943's "Action in the North Atlantic" with Humphrey Bogart. You can't count the feature films about the army, air corps, navy, marine corps, in the Second World War.

So it is small wonder that the small company of men who carried the American war machine across the oceans of the world were unknown to the general public.

A typical freighter or tanker crew numbered about 43 officers and men, plus 22 from the naval armed guard who manned the guns, often assisted by the merchant marine counterparts, whose training included gunnery.

Fast friendships developed among these shipmates, and at war's end it was a major shock for the merchant marine men to discover that they were not even veterans and that the Seamen's Bill of Rights urged on Congress by Presidents Roosevelt and Truman never got out of the House.

I remember the personal bitterness from then that sticks in my craw today. And the mixed emotions that greeted my becoming a veteran in 1989 with none of the life-changing perquisites of the GI Bill of Rights.

Two years ago I voiced these emotions in a poem, "The Song of the Merchant Mariner." It concludes:

The Army and its Air Force were included, The Navy and the Coast Guard and Marines; Alone the merchant seaman was excluded:
The one that fueled and fed their war machines.

He offered his life to his country each time that
he sailed.
To thank him his country and congress and government
failed.

My heart swells with pride suppressed for sixty years at the response of Chairman Filner and his cosponsors and all who have brought HR 23 to the table. Thank you, and God bless you.